SURVEY FRANCE

Black, blanc, beur

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France is a melting pot, but refuses to accept it

NESTLING at the foot of pink Provençal cliffs, surrounded by fragrant pine and almond trees, lies the soulless 1960s new town of Vitrolles, built to house workers recruited in northern France and Algeria for the factories nearby. Since 1997, its concrete town hall, with the words *Liberté*, *Egalité*, *Fraternité* inscribed above its doors, has been controlled by the far-right National Front. The mayor is Catherine Mégret, wife of Bruno, leader of one half of the now-split party.

Far-right parties have prospered on the unsavoury fringes of many European countries. But France's National Front, which when still intact gathered 15% of all votes, has proved peculiarly tenacious. It may now be torn in two, after Jean-Marie Le Pen, its bombastic previous commander-in-chief, and Mr Mégret, then his number two, fell out in a power struggle late last year. But it continues to cast a menacing shadow over French politics, not least because its success divides the mainstream right. And one of the reasons the far right has been able to flourish is the myth of French homogeneity—a feature of the French model.

The recruiting slogan for the far right is "the French first". At the centre of Mr Mégret's scheme, for instance, is "national preference": giving priority to French people in welfare benefits, jobs, housing or anything else. In Vitrolles, his wife has been obediently putting his vision into practice. "National preference", declares her husband, a small, fastidiously neat man, "is simply the national expression of patriotism, the love of your country. Patriotism is not the same as racism."

Frenchmen with attitude

Even if you take such remarks at face value, you are left with a problem: it is no longer meaningful to separate the French—or the *français de souche* (those of "real" French stock), code for whites—from foreigners. The children and grandchildren of Algerians or Moroccans who stepped off the boats in Marseilles in the 1960s are French. The closest many of them have ever been to North Africa is the local Moroccan restaurant. But because France prides itself on turning its newcomers into Frenchmen—a historical impulse reaching back to the revolution—it is difficult to find space for an identity that is neither French nor foreign. "France is afraid of itself," says Mouloud Aounit, of the Movement against Racism and for Friendship between People, a pressure group, "because it is a country of immigration, but has never accepted itself as such."

In 1886, some 1m of France's then population of about 40m were foreigners. North Africans began to arrive from 1910. Successive waves of immigrants were recruited to work in car factories, chemical plants and steelworks. By the end of the 1920s there were 3m foreigners in the country, about 7% of the population (more than today's 6%): a jumble of Belgians, Italians, Poles, Armenians and Moroccans. In 1930, the rate of immigration into France was higher than into America. Throughout the 1960s, France recruited steadily from North Africa, Portugal and Yugoslavia. And still the French, reared on the republican revolutionary legend of a single homogenous nation, had not come to terms with the idea that these "foreigners" were there to stay.

The myth of homogeneity makes it all the harder for the children and grandchildren of immigrants to find a place for themselves in France. And it makes it all the easier for the far right to persuade worried voters that their national identity is being "contaminated" by foreigners. The silent foreign invasion, wrote Mr Mégret in a pamphlet last year, "puts the very identity of our nation in peril. Who can believe that our nation, an old European and Christian land, will remain the same if tomorrow our country becomes covered in mosques?"

In America, you can be a hyphenated-American, part of two cultures at once. In France, you are either French or you are not; there is no cultural half-way house. This is why foreigners who dress or look different, however integrated they may feel, get treated badly. This is also why people like Mr Mégret pontificate about the need to counter "Anglo-Saxon pressures" to save the country from the

dreaded American melting-pot. This is why the National Front wants to "send home" 3m immigrants. And this is why Mrs Mégret has renamed her town Vitrolles-en-Provence, and changed the Place Nelson Mandela into the Place de Provence.

A war on two fronts

Just down the road from the National Front's control room in the Vitrolles town hall lies the Lycée Pierre Mendès-France. On a Friday evening, dozens of teenage French schoolchildren, mostly of North African origin, are hanging about on the terrace waiting for a rock concert, part of national anti-racism week organised by SOS Racism, a pressure group. "1=1; intolerance=0", declare anti-racist posters pinned to the walls. In their Nike baseball caps, baggy tracksuit bottoms and sweatshirts emblazoned "Yankees", these teenagers are culturally a world away from Mr and Mrs Mégret, but legally as French as they are. This is the other side of France: young, defiant, multiracial and inspired by America. And the National Front cannot interfere, as schools are not a municipal responsibility.

Against the odds, French youngsters like these are carving a space for themselves, albeit one filled with resentment. The word *beur* (meaning Arab) is a badge of pride, and the little litany of "black, *blanc*, *beur*" has become an emblem of the young, integrated, streetwise French. They have invented their own slang, *verlan*, which inverts the syllables of standard French. There has been an explosion of popular French rap groups such as "Nique Ta Mère" (Screw Your Mother), their names and their anger inspired as much by the Bronx as by the suburbs of Marseilles. "We've got nothing to lose because we've never had a thing," goes one rap. "If I were you, I wouldn't sleep soundly; the *bourgeoisie* should tremble, the rabble is in town."

More far-reaching in lifting the self-confidence of young *beurs*, and in liberating the French from their narrow self-perception, was the country's victory at the football world cup last year. The French national team was a genuine mix of black, *blanc* and *beur*, the greatest hero among them Zinedine Zidane, the French son of Algerian immigrants. "What better example of our unity and our diversity than this magnificent team?", declared Mr Jospin. A million people poured on to the Champs Elysées in Paris to celebrate, the *bourgeois* in their Barbour jackets, some of the *beurs* waving Algerian flags, and nobody seeming to mind. France saw a new reflection of itself, and liked it. "They would have cheered just as loudly if they had all been white," grumbles Mr Mégret, "perhaps even more."

Since that famous victory, the spirit of the world cup has drifted. Perhaps there has been a tip-toe of a change, but the restless young *beurs* in the suburbs still have no jobs; and the unemployed white voters of Vitrolles still believe that the *beurs* have pinched theirs. All the insecurities and anxieties of ordinary Frenchmen still crowd into the National Front.

The far right has been written off as a spent force many times in the past, only to bounce stubbornly back. Even if the two National Fronts separately fail to

bag as many votes as they did together, the appeal of xenophobia will not have been lost on the mainstream right, currently in disarray and casting about for a new message. Already last year five mainstream right-wing regional presidents, seduced by Mr Mégret's quiet policy of what he calls *dédiabolisation* (a bid to win respectability), formed pacts with the National Front to try to hang on to power; all were expelled from their party. If nothing else, the rise of the National Front seems to have made racism less unacceptable in French people's minds. In an official poll in March, two-fifths of the respondents had no qualms declaring that they were "quite" or "a little bit" racist. And 51% said they thought there were "too many Arabs" in France. France may be changing, but in this respect—as in so many others—the French are still not ready to accept it.